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# ETHNOCULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN DISCOURSE THOUGHT PATTERNS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR LINGUOCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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### *Abstract*

Our cognition is culturally determined, and a great role in it is played by language which fulfils its interpretative function in the process of conceptualizing and categorizing reality. It enables us to describe our consciousness as ‘the dreams of people about the unified’: we all live in the same world, yet the worldviews of different nations are different and have a distinct ethnic component that adds national shades of colour to their worldviews. The specificity of the worldviews, of the mentality, and of the cultural values manifested in language units of different levels are projected into the discourse activity of speakers and into thought patterns of discourse. According to the results of the research, based on the material of several languages, these thought patterns of discourse differ considerably across languages. The comparative analysis of expository essays, written in English by native speakers and Russian students of English, carried out by the authors, enables to conclude that the English written discourse is characterized by a strict linear structure, a wide use of epistemic modality means whereas Russian written discourse is characterized by a less strictly organized structure, numerous digressions from the main topic and emotional tonality. As the article shows, these differences in discourse structure may interfere with the process of acquiring skills in a foreign language discourse and therefore require a lot of work aimed at the formation of linguocultural competence of students in a foreign language.

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**Keywords:** Cultural linguistics, ethnic consciousness, discourse thought patterns, linguocultural competence.



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## 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics which originated over half a century ago and whose rapid development was largely stimulated by the growing dissatisfaction with formal approach to the study of language as a closed semiotic system was primarily concerned with investigating the relations between language and mind. Viewed from the cognitive aspect, language is metaphorically described as a window into consciousness, thus the cognitively oriented study of language is aimed at reconstructing the cognitive processes and cognitive mechanisms that underly various lingual processes.

In order to be able to achieve these challenging aims cognitive linguistics was originally doomed to closely cooperate with various sciences such as cognitive psychology, anthropology, pragmatics, communication theory etc. Cognitive linguistics today is an umbrella term which hosts under its roof a number of disciplines and theoretical approaches: cognitive grammar, cognitive semantics, metaphor studies, constructions grammar etc. One of these disciplines is cognitively oriented cultural linguistics which originally presented a synthesis of ethnosemantics, cultural studies, and ethnography of communication (Palmer, 1996). The core commitment of cultural linguistics as Palmer asserts is that “language is the play of verbal symbols that are based in imagery” (Palmer, 1996, p. 3). Imagery is understood by him not only as the basis for figurative language but as a wide inventory of culturally determined mental images which include cognitive models, schemas, scenarios and other formats of knowledge (Palmer, 1996, p. 290). Today cultural linguistics is a vast field of studies that owes its centrality to cognitive linguistics and presents the interface between language, culture, and conceptualization. Its central term is *cultural conceptualization*, which in Sharifian’s version of cultural linguistics is synonymous to Palmer’s term *imagery*. The aim of cultural linguistics as stated by Sharifian is to study cultural cognition and to explore conceptualizations that have a cultural basis and are encoded by language units and communicated through features of human languages (Sharifian, 2017a; Sharifian, 2017b; Sharifian, 2017c).

It should be noted that European scholars engaged in the study of relations between language, culture and cognition favour the term *ethnolinguistics*, but as the study of papers devoted to the issue ‘culture in language’ reveals, despite the difference in terminology, these studies, especially in their cognitive variant, are very close to the studies in cultural linguistics (Bartmiński, 2017; Bartmiński, 2018; Liszcz, 2017).

## 2. Problem Statement

For many years the research in cultural linguistics was focused mostly on lexicon and phraseology which is quite natural, because these two spheres of language are the most culture sensitive ones. Lexicon and phraseology serve as a kind of map which reflects the specificity of the ethnic world view as well as the significance of certain concepts for the life and activity of a linguo-cultural society. This sphere of research has accumulated a large amount of linguistic data about the key words of culture and the specificity of language world views (Peeters, 2016; Wierzbicka, 1997), the cultural specificity of lexicon, phraseology and metaphors of various languages (Kövecses, 2017; Kövecses, 2019; Kozlova, 2018b; Musolff, 2017; Yu, 2018). A. Wierzbicka and her followers launched a new field in grammar – Ethnogrammar which focuses on the problems of ethnocultural specificity of the grammatical structure of languages and the role of grammar in expressing the mentality of a nation (Enfield, 2004; Wierzbicka,

2006; Wierzbicka, 2018), and her ideas found followers in Russia (Bogdanova, 2018; Kozlova, 2018a]. As for the problems of cultural specificity of text and discourse, discussed in numerous thought-provoking works on the material of different languages, to name but a few (Dementyev, 2018; Ivanova & Chanysheva 2018), they still require a more detailed study.

Describing the national specificity of cultures in his address to UNESCO, the famous anthropologist, culturologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss resorted to the following metaphor of trains "...one could say that cultures are like trains moving each in its own direction. The trains rolling alongside ours are permanently present for us; through the windows of our compartments, we can observe at our leisure the various kinds of car, the face and gestures of the passengers. But if, on an oblique or a parallel track, a train passes in the other direction, we perceive only a vague, fleeting, barely identifiable image, usually just a momentary blur in our visual field, supplying no information about the event itself and merely irritating us because it interrupts our placid contemplation of the landscape which serves as the backdrop of our daydreaming" (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 1-12). Commenting on this metaphor, suggested by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Carol Lynn Moder says that Lévi-Strauss' metaphor, introduced in the late XXth century no longer corresponds to the realities of the XXIst century, in which the representatives of various cultures have not only to watch leisurely one another through the train windows but also to interact with one another, and she slightly modifies his metaphor suggesting her own variant, saying that the paths of all these trains are beginning to converge, so the passengers have to make a stop at one of the stations, gather in the waiting room and discuss a lot of questions, such as: how do the cultural specificity of cognition and cultural values find their manifestation in discourse; how can one master thought patterns of discourse while learning a new language etc. (Moder, 2004). We can continue this metaphor and suggest another modification: the passengers of trains often have to change their routes, and as a result they may find themselves sharing a compartment with other passengers and will have to communicate more closely, and to be able to do so they have to know culture-determined norms of communication.

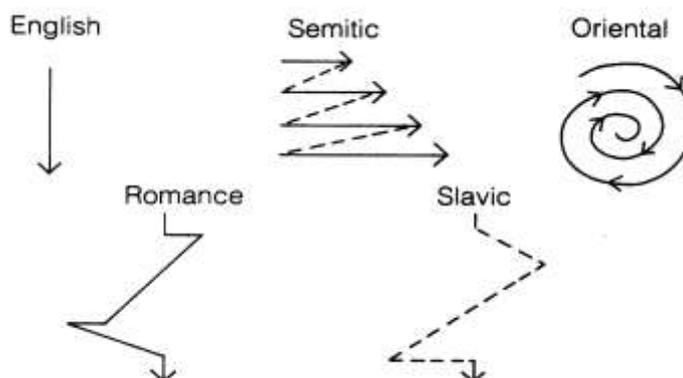
All this, taken together, explains the significance of studying discourse and the principles of its structure in the cognitive-cultural aspect. The topicality of such studies is also conditioned by their application potential – the cultural specificity of discourse must be taken into consideration in the process of teaching a foreign language. The main aim of learning a foreign language is the acquisition of an ability to successfully communicate across cultures both in oral and written forms. We would like to especially emphasize the importance of teaching written discourse as it requires the acquisition of special skills, a special form of thinking. We agree with Dan Slobin's (1991) hypothesis about the existence of special form of thinking which he calls *thinking for speaking* and which he describes as a special form of thinking mobilized for communication, conditioned by the fact that in the process of transition from thought to the search of the most adequate form of its expression the speaker faces the necessity to package his/her thoughts into the patterns existing in the language. The essence of this type of thinking consists in trying to find the most adequate forms of thought verbalization. We presume that it is at this stage that the language exerts its influence on our thinking offering us the forms and patterns that have crystallized in it and in this way directing our thoughts. Describing the process of communication, Enfield (2017) employs the metaphor of a machine: "*Conversation, it turns out, is a finely tuned machine. When we talk, we do not drive the conversation machine. The conversation machine drives us*" (p.12). Supporting Slobin's idea

about the existence of *thinking for speaking* we think that we have every reason to suppose that the process of producing written discourse requires a special type of thinking which might be called *thinking for writing*. This type of thinking requires a greater degree of concentration, it allows no pauses, possible in oral discourse, it excludes the possibility of expressing your thought non-verbally, with the help of a gesture or intonation frequent in oral discourse. Let's remember the famous aphorism of Francis Bacon, pronounced almost 400 years ago in which he precisely expressed the difference between three kinds of learning activities and their role in the process of education: "*Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man*".

The experience of teaching English to Russian students and teaching Russian to speakers of other languages and exchange of opinions with Russian and American colleagues show that very often a student's essay may be quite good from the aspect of its contents, vocabulary and grammar and yet appear not quite authentic. The American professors who teach Writing at our Universities while grading the students' essays often write in their commentaries "*Good ideas, but it seems sort of out of focus*", "*Terrific ideas, but it lacks cohesion*". The reason lies in the fact that the students' second language competence lacks firmly established thought patterns of the second language and as a result they use what is available – the thought patterns of their mother tongue which makes their written discourse not authentic enough.

### 3. Research Questions

One of the first scholars to address the question of the importance of cultural thought patterns in the formation of foreign language competence was Robert Kaplan (Kaplan, 1966; Kaplan, 1972). He published the results of his analysis of about 600 paragraphs of expository English essays written by speakers of Arabic, Korean, Chinese, French, Spanish and Russian which showed considerable difference of discourse patterns, determined by cultural specificity. He summed up the results of his comparative analysis in the following Figure 01.



**Figure 01.** Discourse thought patterns (Kaplan, 1972, p.64).

According to Kaplan's data, the English discourse thought pattern is characterized by a linear structure beginning with a topic sentence with several examples and illustrations to support the main thesis.

The essay must have three components: introduction, body, conclusion. The English discourse is also characterized by an explicit expression of meaning. The Semitic (Arabic) pattern of discourse is characterized by the presence of a strong emotional component, by the abundance of repetitions, syntactic and rhetorical parallelism, and the extensive use of coordination over subordination. The typical feature of Oriental discourse (Chinese and Japanese) is the use of euphemisms, metaphors, implicitness and context dependence which manifest the specificity of Oriental mentality that relies on intuition rather than logic. The Romance thought pattern which finds manifestation in discourse structure demonstrates a greater degree of freedom in presenting thoughts, the use of digressions from the main topic. The Russian material that Kaplan had for analysis was very limited (one student) and Kaplan points out only the use of a very long sentence, containing both coordination and subordination and also the mention of facts not relevant to the topic under discussion. The results achieved by R. Kaplan had a great applicational potential and were used in the practice of teaching English in multicultural groups which enabled to obtain more data about the role of culture in written discourse organization.

Taking into consideration the fact that Kaplan's data of the Russian language was very limited we would like to analyze the differences in discourse structures of Russian and English and emphasize the role of cultural values that underlie these differences. These are the main research questions of the article.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to compare and point out the differences in discourse structures of essays written by English speakers and Russian learners of English, determined by the specificity of language consciousness and cultural thought patterns which underlie the discourse structure. The material of analysis are expository essays written by native speakers of English and Russian students majoring in English.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The research methods used in the article include: 1) introspective analysis aimed at reconstructing the cognitive processes that underlie the structure of discourse and the cultural values which find manifestation in thought patterns of discourse; 2) comparative analysis aimed at revealing the cultural specificity of the language data under study.

#### **6. Findings**

The norms of English written discourse were formulated as long ago as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by John Locke mainly under the influence of English scientific discourse as a model of "good speech" which must correspond to the following principles: it must be "rational, dispassionate, factually based, precise and accurate" (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 29-30). We think we may add one more principle – the expression of your personal opinion without imposing it on others which complies with one of the basic concepts of Anglo culture – PRIVACY. Respect for privacy finds manifestation in 'epistemic commitment', i.e. a wide use of epistemic modality means both in oral and written discourse. The totality of these principles forms the foundation of thought patterns of English written discourse and finds manifestation in such characteristics

as its linear character, presentation of facts supporting the main thesis, cohesion expressed with the help of special connectives, frequent use of epistemic modality markers.

As compared to English, Russian discourse is characterized by a greater degree of freedom in the organization of discursive space, numerous digressions from the main idea, a wider use of coordination at the expense of subordination, a less frequent use of connectives between paragraphs, a spare use of epistemic modality markers and a great degree of emotional saturation. All these characteristics reveal the specificity of Russian thought patterns which are rather different from English.

In the process of mastering English the thought patterns of the mother tongue produce an interfering influence on the acquisition of skills in English writing. The conclusion we arrived at as the result of analyzing over 60 expository essays written in English by Russian students is that in most cases the structure of their essays is based on the thought patterns of the Russian rather than the English discourse. As an illustration of these differences we present essays written by an American student a Russian graduate student majoring in English.

#### *What Is a Russian: Autochthony as a Defining Element*

*Gretchen Ronnow*

*Since identity is a cultural construct, then to define a Russian we must look at some main elements of Russian culture. But Russia stretches across eleven time zones, comprises at least 186 ethnic groups, recognizes 35 official and more than 100 minority languages, and spans thousands of years of history. So to help narrow the focus of this essay, we must consider the always overlapping bases of culture--gastronomy, music, and spirituality –in Barnaul, Siberia, at the turn-of-the-present-century with an especial emphasis on a pervasive autochthonous influence.*

*Barnaul could certainly be recognized as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy – a designation based not on numbers of fine restaurants but on the wide-spread availability, harvesting, and use of indigenous and wild-growing or heirloom foods. Such bounty includes nettles, mushrooms, "star-of-Altai" or sea buckthorn berries, "badan, water-lily roots, sterlet and other fish and river life, and the borschts, gretchkas, salads, shashlik, pelmeni, and other such foods whispering of their own home soil and water and the prayers said over them. Bread, for instance, has always been sanctified as the source of life. And the varieties of Russian bread and its sacramental aspects of baking and sharing are famous world-wide.*

*Volumes could be written about Russian music, but the autochthonous elements – the voice of the Earth – can be heard in Altai throat singing, in human whistling accompanying even symphonic orchestras, and in balalaikas whose sound tickles and swirls at the edge of human consciousness. Exuberant and tragic folksongs such as "The Night" and "Varchavianka" speak of generations of human toil and loss upon the land; and more recently, "Black Tulip" and "Zinky Boys" eulogize dead young soldiers coming home to Mother Earth.*

*Writers – Dostoevsky, Rerikh, Shukshin have written of the holiness engendered by being rooted in the earth. The bones of ancient beasts and peoples such as the Pazyryk are preserved in the permafrost. These spirits still claim their place, and modern humans are not alone. Mt. Belukha is known universally as the*

*spiritual center of the earth, and from its peaks originates the sacred Katun River which flows into the 'Ob. Anglo-Saxon etymology connects "blood" with "bless" as in "consecrated by the shedding of blood." It has been calculated that enough human blood has been shed on Russian soil to cover the land several inches deep. What more sacred land can there be? And from this sense of the land comes the word "mir"--a polysemous word conflating peace/village/society into one unified concept.*

*Modern Russians may define themselves by advanced technologies, electronic and cyber conveniences, "streaming music" and Netflix, and great political power; but those who pause with their hands in humus (the layer of soil of recycled plant and animal, even human, life) and know that life's mysteries abide in their ancient blood, may want to bow down and kiss the earth.*

*What is a Russian?*

*Ivan Khaidarov*

*What is a Russian? I often ask foreigners how they picture Russian people. They usually answer Russian: men are brutal, pushy and dangerous and Russian women are strong, independent and domineering. When hearing Russian accent in the USA the Americans will try to avoid having any business with the Russians because of their reputation of bullies and law-breakers. There's also a stereotype that Russian people drink a lot of vodka, which is unfortunately not completely a lie, though happens not as often as they think.*

*Yes, these features are present in the mentality of a Russian people. But this is far from everything. Russian people are brave. They are so brave that they are reckless. That's partly why we have so low life expectancy rate. Russian people are lazy. They are so lazy that they have to be hardworking to be able to buy fast food instead of cooking it by themselves. Russian children go to school when the weather is 40° Celsius below zero. For foreigners 40 degrees is an apocalypse. Russian people buy broken unsafe buses from Germany, repair and use them. For us economy is more valuable than safety. By the way, Russian people fasten their seatbelts not because they are afraid of an accident but because they are afraid of a fine. Russian people keep at home everything. They are not going to throw away this old tape recorder that hasn't been used for centuries. They are going to take it to their dacha. Someday. Maybe.*

*Russian people are afraid of starving. Especially when they are traveling by train. A two-day trip requires a 6 months' supply of food. Russian people save money during the year and then spend all their savings to buy food for New Year holidays which they are going to throw away because it's too much. There's nothing more powerful than love. Except for Russian babushkas in queues in hospitals when somebody only needs to ask. Russia owns an immense quantity of natural resources and people, who are unable to distribute them properly.*

*You may think I am not a patriot of my country. It is not true. I am. Yes, I ridicule a lot in the mentality of my nation. Naturally, there are many things the Russians need to change themselves. Because the true legacy of our people is not in vodka or balalaika. It is in our unity, willingness to help each other,*

*friendliness and tolerance. It is in our strong will and unbreakable spirit. It is in our inventiveness and amiable humour. This is what a Russian means.*

As the comparative analysis shows, the essay of the American student has a greater degree of coherence: in the opening paragraph the author outlines the focus of the essay and in paragraphs 2, 3, 4 she presents the essence of these three bases of culture supporting her opinion by vivid examples. In the final paragraph the author draws a conclusion trying to build a bridge between the past, the present and future of Russia. The essay has a distinct linear structure and a great degree of cohesion achieved by the reiteration of the three key concepts: *gastronomy*, *music*, and *spirituality* which, as the author supposes, are ‘*overlapping bases of culture*’. The essay of the Russian student reveals more freedom in the structure, which is manifested in the fact that the author does not state the central thesis, but opens his essay by presenting a stereotypical image of a Russian, which he tries to disprove in the paragraphs to follow. The relations between the sentences are based on the principle of coordination rather than subordination, the markers of epistemic modality are seldom if at all used, and the tonality of the essay is very emotional, though the author expresses his emotional attitude in a somewhat ironical manner.

## 7. Conclusion

As we tried to show in the article, the interconnection between cognition, language and culture finds manifestation on the systemic as well as on the functional level, namely in the discursive activity of the speakers. This interconnection finds its manifestation in the fact that each language has culturally specific thought patterns which reflect the mentality and cultural values of the people who speak this language. The knowledge of these thought patterns enables the teacher of a foreign language to take into consideration their specificity and in the process of teaching help the students to see this specificity, overcome the interference of the mother tongue and finally to acquire the skills of writing essays following the thought patterns of the foreign language under study.

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